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## The Development of an Athlete Career Transition Support Programme: A Case Study

The study of career transitions in sport has developed considerably over the past 30 years. As a result, researchers (e.g., Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) revealed that the quality of athletes' career transition is closely related to their life skills development, identity issues, and pre-transition planning. In addition, researchers (e.g., Fleuriel & Vincent, 2009) have consistently highlighted the obligation of national governing bodies (NGB) in assisting athletes in career transition, because of the delay in athletes' life skills development and high degree of athletic identity that may be caused by their high commitment to sport performance. However, the development of programmes and the detailed strategies of the psychological interventions have not been widely examined in the study area. Examining the process of athlete support programme development may be useful to understand organizational staff attitudes toward supporting athletes' career transitions. The present study may contribute to study area by identifying organizational staff views on, and attitudes towards, supporting athletes' career transitions and ideas to encourage sport organizations to assist athletes' subjective well-being both during and after their sport careers. In addition, the findings from the current study might reveal the gaps and links between academic research findings and practical programmes in assisting athletes' psychological issues (e.g., athletic identity) during their career transition process.

The purpose of this study was to explore the Irish Institute of Sport's (IIS) development of an athlete career transition assistance programme focused on examining how people from IIS address the psychological factors associated with athletes' career transitions. This data is a part of a larger study which aimed to examine athlete support programme development. For this paper, we only present the findings related to the psychological intervention strategies due to space limitations.

## **Method**

### **Design**

A case study was used due to its suitability for investigating a certain phenomenon in a real-life context and allows researchers to use multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2009). According to Stake (1995), a case study helps researchers to capture the complexities of a single case, particularly when it is of a special interest. The case in the present study was the athlete retirement programme development of the IIS.

### **The Organization**

The IIS was established in 2006 and the IIS's aims are to: (a) support athletes' performance enhancement, (b) establish effective relationships between athletes and NGB, and (c) deliver various NGB services (e.g., sports medicine, life skills development) to athletes. Since 2008, the IIS has provided a lifestyle programme to support active athletes' performance enhancement support. The programme focuses on education, career development, and life-skills coaching. In October 2009, the IIS decided to develop an athlete retirement programme. This was based on IIS internal reports which indicated the limitations of the current programme in assisting retiring athletes. In order to do this, the IIS invited 15 internal and external advisory programme development group members, including sport psychologists, a retirement planner, developmental experts, a financial planner, a national team coach, a former athlete, and the IIS's athlete support team members.

### **Participants**

The participants in the present study were selected purposively based on Patton's (2002) sampling strategies. Five male participants (mean age  $38 \pm 8$  years) in the athlete retirement support programme development group were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. Three respondents worked for the organization (i.e., a performance service

director, a programme development manager, and a programme provider), and the other two were former athletes (i.e., a current national team coach and a current chair of another national sport institute). We selected both internal and external programme development members to examine various perspectives in assisting athletes.

## **Procedure**

Following information that the IIS was developing a career transition programme from one of the external advisory programme development group members, we contacted a programme development manager and asked whether the IIS was interested in taking part in a study. He agreed to participate and provided potential contacts for participants. The first author contacted four other programme development group members and explained the aims and procedure of the current study. They agreed to take part. Following ethical approval from the University ethics committee and consent from participants to take part, data collection began in December 2009. Participants also agreed to the IIS's identity being revealed in presentation of the study findings. We assembled multiple sources of data from the IIS (Table 1). The first author conducted a total of six interviews with five participants, including two semi-structured interviews with the programme development manager. The first interview with the programme development manager focused on collecting information about the IIS, and all other interviews examined their programme development. The semi-structured interview topics included (a) participants' roles in the programme development, (b) the IIS' psychological approaches in assisting athletes' career transitions, and (c) potential benefits of the programme. Data collection ended in December 2010 as the IIS confirmed the final programme outlines.

## **Analysis**

Table 1 provides a summary of the various sources of data. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The average time for interviews was 57 minutes (ranged between 41 and 80 minutes). Immediately following data collection, we arranged the data into chronological order, in order to understand the characteristics of the organization and the progression of the programme development. We also wrote a detailed case story, to organize and extract insights from the large data set (Eisenhardt, 1989).

We analysed interview transcripts by thematic analysis based on Patton's (2002) suggestions. The process of analysis included: (a) reading and re-reading the original manuscripts, (b) identifying meaning units, and (c) classifying patterns and themes. We used Taylor and Ogilvie's (1994) conceptual model of adaptation to retirement among athletes and the Life Development Intervention model (LDI; Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1992) as theoretical frameworks to guide the description and interpretation of findings from the original data. For example, when participants discussed athletes' psychological experiences and potential benefits related to their intervention programmes, we compared their responses to Danish et al.'s and Taylor and Ogilvie's models and categorised them into themes.

## **Research Credibility**

Since the current study used multiple sources of data, the findings were supported by more than a single source of evidence, which is based on methodological triangulation (Yin, 2009). We also used member checking (Patton, 2002) by sending copies of the manuscripts and results to each participant. Three participants responded and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and findings.

We used theory triangulation, which helps researchers to examine data from various perspectives (Patton, 2002), based on two different models (i.e., LDI; Danish et al., 1992; conceptual model of adaptation to retirement; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). In addition, during

each step of the analysis process, the three authors had regular meetings and discussed the process of clarifying and categorizing the themes. After the analysis, the third author examined the chain of evidence through revisiting raw data and the analysis process, including: (a) examining the evidence supporting the result (tracking down whether the findings are from the original data), (b) assessing the collected data (inspecting the appropriateness of evidence), and (c) checking the link between research protocol and initial study questions (examining that the data analysis process has been done rigorously; Yin, 2009).

## **Results**

The analysis procedure resulted in 102 meaning units, 14 patterns, 6 first order themes, and two higher order themes. The higher order themes included: life skills development interventions and proactive and reactive support. The two themes were interrelated, which can be presented by process (time)/outcome (interventions) matrix. Figure 1 was developed to explain the interventions which the IIS planned to provide to athletes over time.

The results indicated that participants were aware of the need for psychological support to assist athletes' healthy career transitions. The IIS intended to provide psychological interventions over time to support athletes' career transitions. The results revealed that the IIS developed a three stage action plan to assist athletes' career transitions connected to the current programmes (e.g., education programme), including pre-retirement, immediate retirement, and post-retirement support. Interventions were planned to be delivered to athletes in various form, such as one-to-one consultation sessions, group workshops, and showcase events. The results are presented according to how the programme is delivered to athletes over time (i.e., pre, immediate, and post-retirement).

## **Pre-retirement Programme**

The athletes targeted for a pre-retirement support programme were eligible active athletes, aged over 25. Interventions focused on athletes' overall life skills development, and the IIS tried to approach active athletes with a performance agenda. Interventions in this stage include life skills development (long-term career planning), education support (employment potential), employment support (opportunities to access flexible employment), and athlete passport review (potential risks of post-sport life adjustment). The aims of the interventions in the pre-retirement stage were to develop athletes' overall life skills, increase their competence through engaging with outside sport activities, and identify individuals' potential risks in post-sport life adjustment.

When participants talked about the pre-retirement programme, they discussed the need for proactive interventions to support athletes' career transitions. A programme provider said, "We are reactive [in the current programme], we want to start when they are younger, so we are being proactive to assist their development".

The IIS planned to approach athletes in the initial stage of the intervention through analysing athletes' psychological status, monitoring, and encouraging athletes' involvement in the programme through one-to-one sessions. Activities, such as awareness of transferable skills, during one-to-one sessions aimed to enhance athletes' self-esteem by identifying a positive self-image and their abilities.

Participants considered that athletes' involvement in higher education while actively competing might bring positive influences to bear on both athletes' performance and their preparation for post-sport life. A programme provider said, "I think, it [education] is a positive distraction [from their sport]". In addition, participants expected positive psychological outcomes from education which potentially encourages athletes to engage with their student roles. A programme development manager discussed potential benefits of

athletes' lifestyle changes and the IIS's strategies to develop athletes' multiple identities as rounded individuals rather than becoming exclusively focused on being an athlete through their involvement in outside sport activities.

The final programme outline report stated that one of the aims of the pre-retirement support programme was to identify athletes' potential risks in post-sport life adjustment and predict connections with the next stage, which is the immediate retirement support programme.

### **Immediate Retirement Programme.**

The second stage of retirement support for athletes was the immediate retirement support programme, which planned to provide for athletes close to retirement and retiring athletes. Interventions in this stage can be divided into three major areas, including career exit support (e.g., post-sport career plans), group workshops with athletes who are with similar concerns, and counselling sessions focusing on emotional and psychological responses to their career transitions. The support in the immediate retirement stage aimed to develop athletes' overall readiness for retirement, including vocational and psychological readiness.

The planned intervention in this stage tries to help athletes keep their positive self-image without their sport through having interests outside sport. A performance service director talked about the importance of having interests outside of sport among athletes in both pre-retirement and retiring stages. He said, "...to have an identity and self-esteem that is entirely based on performance can be a potential problem. So, having a more rounded identity helps protect their self-esteem".

Another aim of the immediate retirement support programme was building athletes' readiness for retirement. A current national team coach discussed how the intervention might influence athletes' readiness for retirement over time. He said, "...you can also educate them [athletes] about emotional stuff...the programme can make them feel prepared".



Since vocational concerns post-sport are one of the major sources of stress for retiring athletes (Lotysz & Short, 2004), and are also related to athletes' readiness for retirement, one part of the interventions was focused on athletes' vocational support, as well as the tangible benefits of the programme. The vocational support was planned to provide for athletes in various ways, such as career exit consultations (e.g., assessing athletes' immediate needs), career exit interviews (debriefing sessions between athletes and the IIS), and career coaching consultations (e.g., identifying athletes' career goals).

Participants were aware of the influences of the process of athletes' retirement decision-making on the quality of their career transition adjustment and tried to respect athletes' decisions. A programme development manager said, "...we make sure coaches have that conversation with the athletes about that [retirement] decision, or the process of deselection is built on fair ground".

Participants also described that they are aware of athletes' potential negative psychological and emotional experiences during their retirement process and planned to provide counselling sessions with clinical psychologists who work for the IIS, if necessary.

Support from the IIS and athletes' close others were also discussed as important part of intervention. To assist athletes' healthy career transitions, service providers planned to analyse and use athletes' own social support networks. A programme development manager said, "...another area which we are going to look at is social support". He also cited the advantages of former athletes' mentoring support and reciprocal support among retiring athletes in assisting career transition. He said, "...it [former athletes' mentoring] is a very important way of enhancing athletes' self-efficacy and a sense of their future, because the athlete to athlete communication is powerful".

Finally, participants discussed athletes' potential positive psychological outcomes through the programme involvement, such as the sense of a positive self-image and being

supported, a feeling of control over their retirement decision-making, and reduction of concerns and worries about the future.

### **Post-retirement Programme**

The post-retirement programme aimed to support athletes who were already retired from their sport. The programme was completely focused on post-sport lives and was called the athlete reward programme. The structure of the planned intervention was similar to that of immediate support, but the IIS also added some other activities designed for retired athletes (i.e., a mentorship training programme and an athlete award ceremony).

The results revealed that participants considered retiring athletes as potential contributors to Irish sport, who can give back their skills and knowledge to their sports in various ways (e.g., coaching, mentoring). To encourage retired athletes to get involved in giving back their skills to the next generation of Irish athletes, the IIS planned to provide mentoring skills development opportunities to retired athletes if they wanted to be involved in mentoring young athletes in the future.

Another intervention the IIS considered providing for retired athletes was an “athlete awards ceremony” to recognize their sport contributions. Participants discussed beneficial outcomes of the event from the pilot programme such as helping athletes to search for closure following the end of their sport career and move on to next stage of their lives.

Finally, participants discussed those athletes’ potential positive psychological benefits from the programme at this stage might be similar to those in previous stages, which included a sense of being supported, a sense of competence, feelings of self-worth, and a sense of goals and direction for the future.

## **Discussion**

The present study aimed to examine the development of an athlete career transition assistance programme with a specific focus on how a national sport organisation addresses the psychological factors associated with athletes' career transition. The results revealed that the IIS's programme focused on development interventions and proactive and reactive support.

Previous research findings (Fernandez, Stephan, & Fouquereau, 2006) indicated that athletes in different stages of their sport career had different views on their retirement. The present results showed that staff from the IIS intended to provide different types of interventions to athletes in different stages (i.e., active, retiring, and retired athletes), in terms of providing both proactive and reactive interventions to assist athletes' career transitions. As the IIS's new programme was not implemented until the end of the data collection, it may be beyond the scope of the current paper and the data collected, but previous research findings (e.g., Fernandez et al., 2006) indicated that providing different types of interventions throughout the athletes' career transitions process might be an appropriate way to assist them.

The IIS employed Erikson's (1950) idea of generativity to provide opportunities to retired athletes to giving back to their sport whether as a coach or as a mentor to active athletes for mutual (active and retired athletes) benefit, and participants reported some of the positive outcomes from their pilot retirement programme. Researchers such as Lavallee, Park, and Tod (2010) have also discussed potential benefits of generativity in athletes' post-sport life adjustment, in terms of feelings of self-worth and involvement in productive activities. The idea of giving back could be a "win-win" strategy for both athletes and the IIS; however, to produce successful outcomes from the activity, the programme providers and athletes might need to consider whether athletes are ready to deal with their new tasks (e.g., coaching or mentoring).

Finally, although, providing formal retirement ceremonies has not been mentioned in the career transition literature, one of the interventions the IIS planned to deliver to retired athletes was providing retirement ceremonies. In the general psychology literature, Zeigarnik (1927) discovered that people tended to recall unfinished tasks nearly twice more than finished tasks and if individuals had high ambitions for the task, then their unfinished task recall rate was much higher than that of those who had lower ambitions (i.e., Zeigarnik effect). Zeigarnik concluded that the results might be related to feelings of dissatisfaction and regret. Harvey, Weber, and Orbuch (1990) suggested that the Zeigarnik effect might be closely related to individuals' searching for mental closure on a certain event or story, because people do not want to leave events or stories unfinished. Harvey et al. also emphasized that account-making (story-telling process) might help individuals to find a sense of closure on a chain of events and understand their stories as finished tasks, because the story-telling process accompanies several cognitive activities, including remembering, analysing, and searching for affective reactions for the event. Grove, Lavalley, Gordon, and Harvey (1998) highlighted the positive influence of attaining a sense of closure on the quality of athletes' career transitions and suggested that account-making might help to support athletes in seeking a feeling of closure. From Harvey et al.'s and Grove et al.'s perspective, providing retirement ceremonies to retiring athletes could be another way to help them to achieve a sense of closure on their athletic lives and assist them to focus on their future lives instead looking back at their athletic careers. Future research is needed in how the effectiveness of assisting athletes in searching for closure following career transitions.

The present study has several limitations. As the study was conducted with a small number of participants in a certain organization, and data were collected from one particular programme, the results might not be generalized to other national organizations or programmes. However, the aim of this study was not to generalize findings but to transfer

knowledge. Therefore, rich information from various data sources allowed examination of organizational views and psychological intervention programmes and might help other organizations to reflect on and develop athletes' support programme. Since all data were collected from the organization staff and former athletes, the study did not include current athletes. It would be useful to examine athletes' demands for organizational support, as current athletes are potential users of the programmes. Therefore, future research is needed to examine gaps and links between athletes' needs (e.g., appropriate timing for certain assistance) and organizational programmes.

Previous research (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009) has discussed organizational influence on athletes' stress or performance, but organization-related issues in the athletes' career transition field have not been examined in detail. Examining organizational influence on the quality of athletes' career transitions might be useful in identifying detailed organizational roles and if roles and influences are known it might be helpful to assist athletes' career transitions on the organization level, in terms of reducing organizational stress for athletes' career transition process.

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Table 1

*Data sources and detailed information of data*

<b>Data sources</b>	<b>Detailed information</b>	
<b>Interviews</b>	6 semi-structured individual interviews with 5 participants	1 telephone interview 5 face-to-face interviews
<b>E-mail communication</b>	3 e-mail communications	3 mails
<b>Documentation</b>	A total of 173 pages	
	Brochures	10 pages
	Research report	56 pages
	The IIS report on the pilot retirement programme	4 pages
	Official document for the programme development	103 pages
	Final programme outline	
<b>Video files</b>	Athletes' experiences of the pilot retirement support programme and the current lifestyle programme	2 files 4
<b>The IIS and ISC webpages</b>	News stories	3 pages
	Introductions of the IIS, staff, and external programme development members	9 pages
	Information on the current lifestyle programme	11 pages



## Proactive and reactive support

	Pre-retirement support	Immediate retirement support	Post-retirement support
<b>Development interventions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Athletes' overall life skills development</li> <li>• Focusing on performance agenda</li> <li>• Long-term career and financial planning</li> <li>• Time management</li> <li>• Monitoring athletes' motivation</li> <li>• Considering individual differences</li> <li>• Providing higher education opportunities</li> <li>• Balance of life between athletic and non-athletic activities</li> <li>• Developing athletes' multiple identities</li> <li>• Developing athletes' social skills</li> <li>• Identifying potential risk of post-sport life adjustment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keeping positive self-image (self-esteem/self-worth) without their sport</li> <li>• Building readiness for retirement</li> <li>• Career coaching consultations</li> <li>• Providing non-athletic career opportunities</li> <li>• Post-sport career plans</li> <li>• CV writing</li> <li>• Interview skills</li> <li>• Developing transferable skills</li> <li>• Time management</li> <li>• Keeping athletes' sense of control in retirement decision-making</li> <li>• Analysing psychological and emotional status</li> <li>• Counselling sessions with psychologists</li> <li>• Using athletes' social support networks</li> <li>• Mentoring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analysing psychological and emotional status</li> <li>• Counselling sessions with psychologists</li> <li>• Providing opportunities for giving back</li> <li>• A career in sport- showcase career options in sport</li> <li>• CV writing</li> <li>• Interview skills</li> <li>• Career plans</li> <li>• Using athletes' social support networks</li> <li>• Athlete award ceremony</li> </ul>
Potential outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sense of being supported</li> <li>• Sense of competence</li> <li>• Reducing concerns and worries of their future</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sense of positive self-image</li> <li>• Sense of being supported</li> <li>• Feeling of control over retirement</li> <li>• Reducing concerns and worries of their future</li> <li>• Sense of goals and directions for their post-sport lives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sense of being supported</li> <li>• Sense of competence</li> <li>• Feeling of self-worth (through giving back activities)</li> <li>• Sense of goals and directions for their future</li> </ul>

Figure 1. Process/outcome matrix